

Communities of ▶ Practice

*Reshaping Professional Practice and
Improving Organisational Productivity in the
Vocational Education and Training (VET) Sector
Resources for Practitioners*

John Mitchell & Sarah Wood (*John Mitchell & Associates*)

and

Susan Young (*Reframing the Future*)

*Reframing
the
Future*

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Further information:
Australian National Training Authority
Level 5, 321 Exhibition Street
GPO Box 5347BB
Melbourne Vic 3001

Telephone: 03 9630 9800
Facsimile: 03 9630 9888
ANTA website: www.anta.gov.au

Communities of ▶ Practice

A Literature Review for VET

Globalisation and the rise of communications and information technology are having a marked impact on organisations and the individuals that work within them. In this global and networked environment, knowledge is a key source of competitive advantage that can improve individual and organisational effectiveness and efficiency and lead to innovation and creativity. Traditional knowledge management approaches attempt to capture existing knowledge within formal systems, such as databases (Wenger, 1998a, p.1). During the 1990s Communities of Practice emerged as an approach to engaging people in the process of 'knowledge sharing, learning and change' (Wenger and Snyder, 2000, p. 139).

Communities of Practice have the potential to be an organisation's most versatile and dynamic knowledge resource. Not being formal entities, however, they are a resource that is easily overlooked (Wenger, 1998a, p. 253). Through empowering individuals to learn and develop from interaction with colleagues, the formation and maintenance of Communities of Practice effects an organisation's ability to deepen and renew its learning and to improve organisational productivity and practice.

Given the nature of Communities of Practice, VET practitioners stand to gain from the formation and maintenance of such communities across the VET sector. As a tool for transferring knowledge and developing professional skills, Communities of Practice within the VET sector can facilitate the achievement of both individual workplace learning and a closer collaboration between educational organisations and industry (Young and Mitchell, 2000, p. 2). This paper analyses the theory underpinning Communities of Practice and provides an outline of the individual and organisational benefits to be gained from these communities.

Origin of the term Communities of Practice

The term Communities of Practice was introduced in the early 1990s by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger and first used extensively in the book *Situated Learning* (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Rather than defining learning as the acquisition of knowledge, they situated learning in certain forms of social co-participation, termed Communities of Practice. These communities

imply participation in an activity system about which participants share understandings concerning what they are doing and what that means in their lives and for their communities. (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 98)

During the 1990s the term was developed further by others from Xerox PARC (Duguid and Brown 1991, Huberman and Hogg 1994, Brown and Gray 1995) who see Communities of Practice as a critical, novel concept for understanding organisations, particularly in the context of knowledge management and organisational learning.

What are Communities of Practice?

Although the specific term was only introduced in the early 1990s, the concept underpinning Communities of Practice has a much longer history. According to Wenger and Snyder (2000), Communities of Practice were common as far back as ancient times:

In classical Greece, for instance, corporations of metalworkers, potters, masons and other craftsmen had both a social purpose (members worshipped the same deities and celebrated holidays together) and a business function (members trained apprentices and spread innovation). In the Middle Ages, guilds played similar roles for artisans throughout Europe. (p. 140)

Contemporary literature recognises that Communities of Practice nowadays are as diverse as the situations that give rise to them (Wenger and Snyder, 2000, p. 141). Situations producing Communities of Practice can include families developing practices, routines, rituals and stories to establish a habitable way of life, workers organising their lives with their colleagues and customers to get their jobs done, students in schools and universities, and even recovering alcoholics who attend weekly meetings (Wenger, 1998a, p. 6).

Wenger (1998b) maintains that, unlike a community of interest or a geographical community, a Community of Practice defines itself along three dimensions – what it is about, how it functions and what capability it has produced.

Table 1: Three dimensions of a Community of Practice (based on Wenger 1998b)

Dimension	Description
What it is about	<i>Joint enterprise</i> as understood and continually renegotiated by its members
How it functions	<i>Mutual engagement</i> that binds members together into a social entity
What capability it has produced	The <i>shared repertoire</i> of communal resources (routines, sensibilities, artefacts, vocabulary, styles etc) that members have developed over time

The *joint enterprise*, *mutual engagement* and *shared repertoire* that Wenger (1998b) identifies are common across all Communities of Practice.

Different Communities of Practice, however, have different emphases. The three emphases that emerge from the literature are:

1. Communities of Practice as communities of learners
2. Communities of Practice as collaborative groups within organisations
3. Communities of Practice as virtual communities (a sub-set of 1 and 2).

These emphases describe communities whose members interact in different ways and focus on different goals. Nevertheless, at the core of each of these communities, members remain bound by what they do together and by what they have learnt through their mutual engagement in a range of activities.

Each of the three emphases is relevant to the VET sector, yet the discussion below identifies that Communities of Practice as collaborative groups within organisations is the most relevant for VET practitioners and organisations particularly in the context of recent changes to the VET sector, such as implementation of the National Training Framework (NTF). The National Training Framework requires substantial changes to educational delivery and assessment, new collaborative arrangements with industry and modifications to the workforce in provider organisations.

Mitchell and Young (2001) maintain that the development of the NTF since the mid-1990s is the largest single change ever undertaken in the sector, as it not only impacts on all students, teachers and trainers and the full range of VET stakeholders, but on all provider organisations and personnel within VET. For Mitchell and Young (2001), the national approach to training creates the need for change management and staff development programs on a wide scale.

One strategy to address the staff development and change management needs of the NTF, is to encourage collaboration between VET providers through the development of Communities of Practice.

Communities of Practice as communities of learners

Communities of Practice facilitate both individual and organisational learning. For Wenger (1998a), being alive as human beings means that we are constantly engaged in the pursuit of enterprises of all kinds, from ensuring our physical survival to seeking the loftiest pleasures:

As we define these enterprises and engage in their pursuit together, we interact with each other and with the world and we tune our relations with each other and with the world accordingly. In other words we learn. (p. 45)

Wenger (1998a) believes that over time, this collective learning results in practices that reflect both the pursuit of our enterprises and the attendant social relations:

These practices are thus the property of a kind of community created over time by the sustained pursuit of shared enterprise. It makes sense, therefore, to call these kinds of communities Communities of Practice. (p. 45)

In this way, Communities of Practice are an integral part of our daily lives and contradict the assumption that learning is an individual process, that it has a beginning and an end, that it is best separated from the rest of our activities, and that it is the result of teaching (Wenger, 1998a, p. 3). Instead Wenger sees learning as social participation and refers not just to engagements in localised activities with certain people, but to a more encompassing process of being active participants in the practices of social communities and constructing identities in relation to these communities (p. 4).

Communities of Practice as communities of learners will be of general interest in the VET context, particularly for the principles that they are based on, such as facilitating individual and organisational learning, as facilitating both types of learning is an ongoing goal in the VET sector (Mitchell & Young, 2001). However, Communities of Practice as collaborative groups within organisations are more directly relevant to the VET sector, as the following discussion demonstrates.

Communities of Practice as collaborative groups within organisations

As communities of learners, Communities of Practice are ‘so pervasive that they rarely come into explicit focus’ (Wenger, 1998a, p. 7). Within an organisational context, however, Communities of Practice are increasingly being recognised for their potential to play a key role in creating and disseminating knowledge.

Communities of Practice are a new organisational form that encourages individuals to create, refine, share and use knowledge effectively (McDermott, 1999). In an environment where knowledge management is key to organisational success, Lesser and Everest (2001) argue that Communities of Practice help to develop the appropriate connections, relationships and context that allow knowledge to flow between those who have knowledge and those who require it. As collaborative groups within organisations, Communities of Practice are

groups of people informally bound together by shared expertise and passion for a joint enterprise – engineers engaged in deep-water drilling, for example, consultants who specialise in strategic marketing, or frontline managers in charge of cheque processing at a large commercial bank. (Wenger and Snyder, 2000, p. 139)

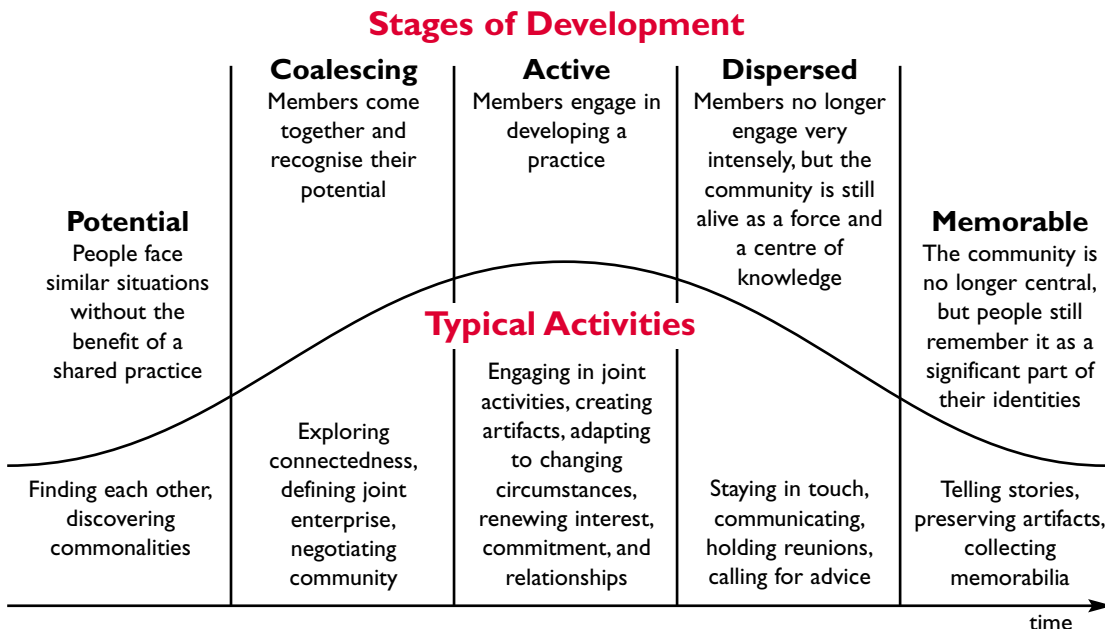
A Community of Practice within an organisation does not necessarily imply a well-defined, identifiable group, or visible boundaries:

Some Communities of Practice meet regularly – for lunch on Thursdays, say. Others are connected primarily by email networks... A community can even thrive with members from different companies; for example, the CEOs who make up the Business Roundtable meet regularly to discuss relationships between business and public policy, among other things. (Wenger and Snyder, 2000, pp. 139-140)

Brown (1999) maintains that there can be many Communities of Practice within a single company and people can belong to more than one of them. He believes that what holds these communities together is ‘a common sense of purpose and a real need to know what each other knows’. This common sense of purpose can be the pursuit of solutions to a common type of problem (Johnson-Lenz, 1999) or simply common goals (Lesser and Everest, 2001).

A Community of Practice within an organisation has various stages of development, each characterised by different levels of interaction among the members and different kinds of activities. Wenger (1998b) outlines these stages of development in the following diagram.

Diagram 1: Stages of development of Communities of Practice (Wenger, 1998b)



These stages of development set Communities of Practice apart from other types of organisational forms and structures. According to Lesser and Everest (2001), Communities of Practice differ from other kinds of groups found in organisations in the way they define their enterprise, exist over time and set their boundaries:

Being primarily informal, the membership of these communities often fluctuates, in terms of both the number of participants and the level of intensity with which people partake in community activities. Communities tend to emerge from existing networks of individuals, often crossing traditional organisational boundaries. (p. 38)

In addition, Lesser and Everest (2001) maintain that communities tend not to have direct responsibility for the production of a specific deliverable within a given time span, as a typical project team would:

Rather, the community tends to set its own agenda over its lifespan, continually defining itself by the needs of its members. Communities typically take part in a number of formal and informal activities, ranging from education sessions and conferences to day-to-day interaction designed to solve specific work problems. (p. 38)

The following table highlights the difference between Communities of Practice, formal work groups, teams and informal networks.

Table 2: Characteristics of different types of groups (from Wenger and Snyder, 2000)

	What is the purpose?	Who belongs?	What holds it together?	How long does it last?
Community of Practice	To develop members' capabilities; to build and exchange knowledge	Members who select themselves	Passion, commitment, and identification with the group's expertise	As long as there is interest in maintaining the group
Formal work group	To deliver a product or service	Everyone who reports to the group's manager	Job requirements and common goals	Until the next reorganisation
Project team	To accomplish a specified task	Employees assigned by senior management	The project's milestones and goals	Until the project has been completed
Informal network	To collect and pass on business information	Friends and business acquaintances	Mutual needs	As long as people have a reason to connect

For Wenger (1998b), people can belong to Communities of Practice at the same time as they belong to other organisational structures. Communities of Practice complement the work individuals do within the organisation by enabling them to develop the knowledge and skills necessary to achieve project goals, to adapt to changing strategy and even to create new and innovative business strategy:

In their business units, they shape the organisation. In their teams, they take care of projects. In their networks, they form relationships. And in their Communities of Practice, they develop the knowledge that lets them do these other tasks. This informal fabric of communities and shared practices makes the official organisation effective and, indeed, possible. (p. 4)

The challenge for organisations, including VET sector organisations, is to provide sufficient encouragement for Communities of Practice to develop and be sustained over time. Given this encouragement, Communities of Practice can have long-term impacts on organisational practice and productivity, helping to drive strategy, start new lines of business, solve problems quickly, transfer best practices, develop professional skills, and recruit and retain talent (Wenger and Snyder, 2000).

The potential impacts of Communities of Practice are invaluable for VET sector organisations that are faced with the multiple challenges involved in implementing the National Training Framework and responding to changing industry needs.

Outside of the VET context, a number of different organisations have developed Communities of Practice and are benefiting from these communities in different ways. The table below sets out some notable examples, identified by Wenger and Snyder (2000).

Table 3: Notable Communities of Practice (from Wenger and Snyder, 2000)

Organisation	Impact of Community of Practice
IBM	Professional development (PD) activities at IBM focus on Communities of Practice, an arena that the company has found particularly effective for fostering PD. According to Wenger and Snyder (2000) Communities of Practice at IBM 'hold their own conferences, both in-person and on-line. Presentations, hallway conversations, dinners, and chat rooms are opportunities for members to exchange ideas, build skills and develop networks' (p. 141). http://www.foundationknowledge.com/library/readings/IBM%20White paper.htm
DaimlerChrysler	To avoid losing functional expertise and the ability to keep up with leading-edge change, senior managers and engineers formed Communities of Practice known as 'tech clubs'. These clubs were composed of experts from different car platforms and helped the company successfully invest in manufacturing small cars and minivans, a change that cut R&D costs and production times by more than half. (see Wenger and Snyder, 2000)

A number of Communities of Practice have also been established within VET sector organisations, as highlighted in the following discussion.

Examples of Communities of Practice as collaborative groups within VET organisations

At a time of considerable change within the VET sector, Communities of Practice are powerful mechanisms to assist VET practitioners implement the National Training Framework (NTF), particularly in terms of developing new relationships between practitioners and industry. Through the sharing of expertise and a common, innovative approach to the challenges inherent in changing work practices and strategies, Communities of Practice have the potential to make the implementation of the NTF less difficult and, eventually, more successful.

A number of VET sector organisations are already forming Communities of Practice across organisations, whole industries and States and Territories (Young and Mitchell, 2000). Young and Mitchell (2000) identify a number of types of Communities of Practice to emerge across the VET sector, including:

- industry-practitioner Communities of Practice – communities that include both educational practitioners and industry representatives
- national practitioner Communities of Practice – national groups of practitioners from many organisations or work sites.

Mitchell and Wood (2001) identify some of the benefits to arise from the formation of such communities as a result of two different Framing the Future projects conducted in 1999 and 2000. Doug Crawford, State Manager of Agriculture and Horticulture training at TAFE Tasmania, describes the benefits of the national practitioner Community of Practice that developed between TAFE Tasmania, Shepparton TAFE College and Northern Melbourne Institute of TAFE in Victoria, the Katherine campus of the Northern Territory University, the Challenger College of TAFE in Western Australia and the Torrens Valley Institute of TAFE in South Australia:

There has been a complete 360-degree turn in terms of peoples' knowledge and attitude towards Training Packages. Many of the Institutes that we have collaborated with are of similar size to TAFE Tasmania and as such they share similar issues. The implementation of Training Packages was made easier [through collaboration with colleagues at a national level]. (p. 45)

Similarly, Peter Smith, Head Plumbing Teacher from South Western Sydney Institute of TAFE, was positive about the industry-practitioner Community of Practice that developed as part of the Framing the Future project he was involved with in early 2000. One initiative of the project team was to draw together a network of people from VET and industry:

The group convened two meetings during 2000 and invited representatives from plumbing departments in the Sydney metropolitan area and environs, including Wollongong and Wyong. At these meetings, representatives were encouraged to share their knowledge of Training Packages and at the second meeting the South Western Sydney Institute Plumbing Faculty Director as well as a representative from the NSW Construction Industry Training Advisory Body (ITAB) were present. The input from the ITAB representative was invaluable as he was able to fill in the knowledge gaps we had about the Training Package. (p. 47)

In both cases cited above, VET practitioners used Communities of Practice to broaden and strengthen their knowledge of Training Packages and the National Training Framework and found that, through collaboration, the process of change became a more positive experience.

Virtual Communities of Practice

Communities of Practice can be developed and maintained using email and the Internet to connect members, especially if Communities of Practice cross organisational boundaries and organisations are distributed across different States and Territories. In this sense, some virtual Communities of Practice exist as sub-sets of organisational Communities of Practice, the only difference being the method of connecting members.

Communities of Practice operating in a virtual environment can partly base their community on how they might function if they were located physically together:

Some aspects of a Community of Practice should translate from the co-located to the virtual world easily, for example finding a common purpose or at least a shared interest, and if the members are doing similar jobs, then there will already be a shared domain language and knowledge. (Kimble et al, 2000, p. 10)

Away from any organisational setting, virtual Communities of Practice can also develop using the Internet as a means of linking people with common interests:

Across a worldwide web of computers, people congregate in virtual spaces and develop shared ways of pursuing their common interests. (Wenger, 2000, p. 6)

People can connect through newsgroups, email, chat and websites devoted to topics of common interest. If the individuals who connect in this way do not pursue common goals, they can at least use the Internet as a forum for discussion of topics, a way of exchanging information and a means of solving problems. The World Bank is developing such a community using the Internet to connect people from all around the world, as explained below.

Figure 1: Example of a virtual Community of Practice in the World Bank

The World Bank is developing a web-portal called the Global Development Gateway, in collaboration with the private sector, international agencies, governments, and non-government organisations. The aim of the portal is to promote the generation and sharing of global knowledge through, amongst other things, Communities of Practice. These communities will focus on creating and applying knowledge to stimulate and facilitate the transition to the knowledge economy.

See <http://www.worldbank.org/knowledgebank/research.html>

In terms of virtual Communities of Practice in an organisational setting, Kimble et al (2000) argue it is more difficult for members of virtual Communities of Practice to interact in a way that will effect organisational practice and productivity. Through analysing various case studies of Communities of Practice, they were able to compare Communities of Practice that met face-to-face and those that met electronically. The participants that they interviewed felt that meetings in the physical world allowed them to get to know each other better than electronic meetings.

The importance of having a good personal relationship with the other members was regarded as essential by all of the members...[who] gained a greater feeling of identity and common purpose through knowing each other. As one respondent described it "...you need that personal relationship if you are to go the extra half mile for someone". (Kimble et al, 2000, p. 12)

By connecting members through email alone, Kimble et al (2000) believe that virtual Communities of Practice do not allow members to gain sufficient confidence and trust in each other, which leads to a lack of legitimacy and impeded community capabilities. By combining face-to-face meetings with email meetings, organisations can overcome these difficulties of legitimacy. But until there is a framework for understanding the different aspects of virtual team working and to guide their development in real organisational settings, Kimble et al (2000) maintain that these problems will continue to exist.

Examples of virtual Communities of Practice in the VET sector

Young and Mitchell (2000) note that electronic communication is used extensively by Framing the Future project teams, many of which have members spread across large distances. The term they use to describe these VET sector communities is 'networked Communities of Practice', which comprise groups of practitioners who use electronic communication as a means to provide coherence to their project (Young and Mitchell, 2000). These communities are similar to the virtual Communities of Practice described by Wenger and Snyder (2000) and Kimble et al (2000), and are a successful means of linking VET practitioners, particularly those who participate in Framing the Future projects, across Australia.

The benefits of these virtual, or networked, Communities of Practice are widespread. Anthony Tyrrel from Canberra Institute of Technology reported in *Re-framing the Future* (Mitchell, 2000), that the National Horticulture TAFE Providers' Network, which had eleven different Framing the Future projects operating around Australia, decided to collaborate to optimise the benefits of the project. Regular teleconferences were scheduled, to enable the groups to share findings about the National Training Framework. The group tackled the problem of duplicating resources and he reported that 'when you found yourself battling with an issue, you'd ring the others'.

Mitchell and Wood (2001) also highlighted some of the benefits of networked Communities of Practice in the following case study.

Figure 2: Excerpts from an interview with Vicki Joyce, Kangan Batman Institute of TAFE (Mitchell & Wood, 2001)

Vicki Joyce and her staff from Corrections training at Kangan Batman Institute of TAFE in Victoria developed valuable networks with other Corrections teachers across the State as part of the Framing the Future project they participated in during 2000. Since the completion of the project, these networks have been maintained through regular email contact. As a result, the isolation that Vicki Joyce believes was once part of being a Corrections teacher has now been broken down and the continued email contact has helped teachers to develop an understanding of the Training Packages that relate to the Corrections field and to collaboratively overcome the difficulties involved in their implementation.

There is great potential for the number of networked Communities of Practice to increase in the VET sector, and to provide VET practitioners with a mechanism to support one another through the sharing of professional expertise and a means of openly discussing issues, particularly in the context of implementing the National Training Framework (NTF). The NTF requires VET practitioners to work with industry, and sometimes industry clients are spread across States and Territories, making the use of electronic communication an essential strategy.

Communities of Practice as a key to knowledge management

Recent research into Communities of Practice (McDermott, 1999; Allee, 2000; Lesser and Everest, 2001) highlights the important role such communities can play in developing successful knowledge management within organisations. Knowledge management 'encompasses an overarching business strategy aimed at taking advantage of a company's information, experience, and expertise to serve customers better and respond quickly to changing market conditions' (Derfler et al, 2001). If successfully approached, knowledge management 'creates a thriving work and learning environment that fosters the continuous creation, aggregation, use and re-use of both organisational and personal knowledge in the pursuit of new business value' (Allee, 2000, p. 1). Managed effectively, Lesser and Everest (2001) maintain that knowledge can be used to improve effectiveness, efficiency and innovation.

In an environment shaped by globalisation and the diffusion of communications and information technology, knowledge and learning have become the new strategic imperative of organisations. In terms of VET sector organisations, Mitchell and Young (2001) identify that the VET sector is inextricably linked to the global forces that impact on VET industry clients. Hence, knowledge management needs to play a vital role in contemporary VET organisations.

Traditionally, organisations have managed knowledge through the distribution of documents and the development of databases. According to McDermott (1999) however, many organisations are discovering that the real value in knowledge management is in sharing ideas and insights that are not documented and are hard to articulate. He outlines the case of a group of professionals working at a computer company to highlight his point:

A group of systems designers for a computer company tried to share their knowledge by storing their documentation for client systems in a common database. They soon discovered that they did not need each other's documentation. They needed to understand the logic other systems designers used – why *that* software, with *that* hardware and *that* type of service plan. They needed to understand the thinking of the other system designers. (p. 1)

Rather than relying on databases or documents, McDermott (1999) argues that people learn most effectively through the experience, or the tacit knowledge, of their peers. For Lesser and Everest (2001), documents alone do not carry sufficient background and meaning to transfer knowledge effectively.

Often, without a detailed understanding of how the knowledge was developed, under what conditions the knowledge was created and why the knowledge was important, it is extremely difficult to make practical use out of any sort of documentation. Any novice doing home repairs or assembling toys realises the importance of being able to communicate the subtleties that are often lost when knowledge is committed to paper. (p. 38)

Communities of Practice are effective in managing knowledge within organisations because they are made up of groups of individuals who share information, insights, experience and tools about an area of common interest. They facilitate the sharing of the tacit knowledge that McDermott (1999) and Lesser and Everest (2001) maintain is so important to meaningful learning and development. Wenger and Snyder (2000) believe that they are 'the hidden fountainhead of knowledge development and therefore the key to the challenge of the knowledge economy' (p. 145).

For the VET sector, Communities of Practice could be a key to responding to the challenges of further developing the skills and knowledge of VET practitioners and building high-performing VET organisations based on innovation, creativity, flexibility and competitiveness (see Mitchell and Young, 2001).

Benefits of Communities of Practice for individuals

As powerful learning and development tools, Communities of Practice have many benefits for individuals. Such communities encourage the sharing and creation of knowledge, enabling members, among other things, to actively engage in day-to-day tasks within their organisation and to develop innovative approaches to problems.

The literature (see McDermott, 2000; Wenger and Snyder, 2000) also identifies a number of other specific benefits for individuals participating in Communities of Practice, as outlined below.

Communities of Practice enable employees to manage change

Wenger and Snyder (2000) argue that 'when a company reorganises into a team-based structure, employees with functional expertise may create Communities of Practice as a way of maintaining connections with peers'. They believe that people may also form communities 'in response to changes originating outside the organisation, such as the rise of e-commerce, or inside, such as new company strategies' (p. 141).

Communities of Practice foster trust and a sense of common purpose

According to McDermott (2000), frank and supportive discussions of real problems frequently build a greater sense of connection and trust between community members. 'As they share ideas and experiences, community members often develop a shared way of doing things, a set of common practices, and a greater sense of common purpose' (p. 4). In the course of helping each other, sharing ideas, and collectively solving problems, individuals 'often become a trusted group of peers' (p. 4).

Communities of Practice add value to professional lives

Communities of Practice frequently form around topics community members have invested many years in developing. McDermott (2000) maintains, however, that communities are not just focused on common interests, but on 'the practical aspects of a particular practice, everyday problems, new tools, developments in the field, and things that do and do not work' (pp. 2-3). In this way, Communities of Practice add value to the professional lives of their members.

Organisational benefits of Communities of Practice

As a key knowledge management asset, Communities of Practice effect organisational practice and productivity and can lead to innovation and revitalised business strategy. Wenger and Snyder (2000) highlight a number of ways in which Communities of Practice add value to

organisational practice; each benefit stems from the fact that Communities of Practice can be knowledge management assets. They believe that Communities of Practice:

- Generate knowledge and encourage skill development
- Use knowledge management to drive strategy
- Disseminate valuable information and transfer best practice
- Initiate new lines of business including new products and services.

Communities of Practice can also positively effect organisational productivity. Lesser and Everest (2001) and Wenger and Snyder (2000) highlight the following productivity gains.

Communities of Practice facilitate rapid responses to customer needs and problems

By developing knowledge of its members and their various strengths, Lesser and Everest (2001) believe that Communities of Practice enable organisations to quickly identify individuals with the subject-matter expertise necessary to provide the best answer to a client problem (p. 39).

Communities of Practice decrease the learning curve for new employees

Communities of Practice serve as a vehicle to develop mentoring relationships between junior employees and established practitioners. Lesser and Everest (2001) argue that this helps new employees to understand how their role fits into the wider organisational context and how their job impacts on other individuals and processes.

Communities of Practice help companies recruit and retain talent

According to Wenger and Snyder (2000), members of Communities of Practice have an understanding of the expertise within their community. As such, community members can identify opportunities that are tailor-made to the interests and expertise of their colleagues.

Many of these potential benefits rely on sufficient encouragement and support from organisations in their approach to Communities of Practice. Although Wenger (1998b) maintains that most Communities of Practice exist whether or not the organisation recognises them, a good number will benefit from some attention, 'as long as this attention does not smother their self-organising drive' (p.7).

Critical success factors for developing and maintaining Communities of Practice

Although Communities of Practice are informal and self-organising, recent research (McDermott, 2000; Wenger and Snyder, 2000; Allee, 2000; Lesser and Everest, 2001) highlights that there are a number of ways to make such communities more successful. For instance, Wenger and Snyder (2000) maintain that organisations need to provide sufficient encouragement and support for Communities of Practice to develop and be sustained over time.

McDermott (2000) identifies the following four key challenges in starting and supporting Communities of Practice:

- The management challenge – to communicate that the organisation truly values sharing knowledge
- The community challenge – to create real value for community members and ensure that the community shares cutting edge thinking
- The technical challenge – to design human and information systems that not only make information available but also help community members think together
- The personal challenge – to be open to the ideas of others and maintain an enthusiasm for developing the community's practice.

According to McDermott (2000), there are a number of steps necessary in order to meet these challenges, as set out below.

Table 4: Steps to meet the challenges of developing Communities of Practice (from McDermott, 2000)

Challenge	Steps to meet challenge
The management challenge	1. Focus on topics important to both the business and community members
	2. Find a well-respected community member to coordinate the community
	3. Make sure people have time and encouragement to participate
	4. Build on the core values of the organisation
The community challenge	5. Get key thought leaders involved
	6. Create forums for thinking as well as systems for sharing information
	7. Build relationships between community members
	8. Develop an active core group
The technical challenge	9. Make it easy to contribute to and access the community's knowledge and practices
The personal challenge	10. Create real dialogue about cutting edge issues

McDermott's challenges are a valuable starting point for VET practitioners involved in the development and maintenance of Communities of Practice.

Although they recognise that each community is unique in the type of support it requires from the organisation, Lesser and Everest (2001) provide some general guidelines that can be applied in many situations.

Focus resources on communities that have strategic implications for the organisation

An organisation should develop an understanding of the types of knowledge that are critical to achieving strategic business objectives, and focus on those communities that are most likely to provide and take advantage of that knowledge.

Provide the community with the time and space to interact

Formal organisations can support Communities of Practice by providing them with the resources to enable community members to get to know each other and build the social capital necessary to effectively share knowledge' (p. 40). Activities that are beneficial are lunchtime meetings, training sessions and community forums.

Designate roles and responsibilities to support the community

Some of these roles could include a community leader/facilitator, who was responsible for ensuring the overall community vibrancy and effectiveness; a content manager (or managers), who was responsible for ensuring that the explicit knowledge was continually updated and organised; and events personnel, who create the venues and situations where individuals could connect face-to-face.

Market the community and its success stories

Effective communities tend to spend time and resources letting others know about the potential resources that they can offer community members. This is especially true in distributed organisations, where individuals may rarely meet others who do similar kinds of activities or functions.

Final Note

Communities of Practice have the potential to reshape professional practice and to improve organisational productivity. Practitioners and organisations within the VET sector will benefit from the development and maintenance of such communities, particularly as a tool to assist in the implementation of the National Training Framework, with its emphasis on networking with industry and developing new ways of training. Communities of Practice are also valuable in encouraging further innovative professional practices amongst VET practitioners across Australia.

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Communities of ▶ Practice

Definitions of Communities of Practice

Our preferred definitions, drawn from the literature, of aspects of Communities of Practice are set out in the table below.

Table 1: Definitions of components of Communities of Practice

Components	Definitions
What are they?	Communities of Practice are 'groups of people bound together by shared expertise and passion for a joint enterprise' (Wenger and Snyder, 2000, p. 139).
What holds them together?	'a common sense of purpose and a real need to know what each other knows' (Brown, 1999). This common sense of purpose can be the pursuit of solutions to a common type of problem (Johnson-Lenz, 1999) or simply common goals (Lesser and Everest, 2000).
How do they function?	According to Lesser and Everest (2000), Communities of Practice are primarily informal and the membership often fluctuates. They tend not to have direct responsibility for the production of a specific deliverable within a given time span, as a typical project team would. Rather the community tends to set its own agenda over its lifespan, continually defining itself by the needs of its members.
Benefits?	Communities of Practice can have 'long-term benefits on organisational practice and productivity, helping to drive strategy, start new lines of business, solve problems quickly, transfer best practices, develop professional skills, and recruit and retain talent' (Wenger and Snyder, 2000).

Three different emphases emerge from the literature on Communities of Practice:

1. Communities of Practice as collaborative groups within organisations
2. Communities of Practice as communities of learners
3. Communities of Practice as virtual communities.

These three different emphases are often interconnected. For instance, Communities of Practice as groups within organisations can use email and the Internet as a means of establishing and maintaining contact. In addition, all Communities of Practice whether within organisations, within the wider community or in the virtual environment, are essentially communities of learners bound by a desire to be informed by and to inform each other.

1. Communities of Practice as collaborative groups within organisations

The definition of Communities of Practice as collaborative groups within organisations alerts VET practitioners to how Communities of Practice can lead to effective knowledge management and change management within organisations.

Wenger and Snyder (2000) recognise that, in an environment where it is essential that organisations invest in knowledge management, Communities of Practice are a new organisational form that 'promise to radically galvanise knowledge sharing, learning and change.' These communities are:

groups of people informally bound together by shared expertise and passion for a joint enterprise – engineers engaged in deep-water drilling, for example, consultants who specialise in strategic marketing, or frontline managers in charge of cheque processing at a large commercial bank. (p. 139)

Brown (1999) maintains that there can be many Communities of Practice within a single company and people can belong to more than one of them. He believes that what holds these communities together is 'a common sense of purpose and a real need to know what each other knows'. This common sense of purpose can be the pursuit of solutions to a common type of problem (Johnson-Lenz, 1999) or simply common goals (Lesser and Everest, 2000). According to Lesser and Everest (2000), Communities of Practice differ significantly from other types of organisational forms and structures:

Being primarily informal, the membership of these communities often fluctuates, in terms of both the number of participants and the level of intensity with which people partake in community activities. Communities tend to emerge from existing networks of individuals, often crossing traditional organisational boundaries. (p. 38)

In addition, Lesser and Everest (2000) maintain that communities tend not to have direct responsibility for the production of a specific deliverable within a given time span, as a typical project team would:

Rather, the community tends to set its own agenda over its lifespan, continually defining itself by the needs of its members. Communities typically take part in a number of formal and informal activities, ranging from education sessions and conferences to day-to-day interaction designed to solve specific work problems. (p. 38)

Given sufficient encouragement from management, Communities of Practice can have long-term impacts on organisational practice and productivity, helping to drive strategy, start new lines of business, solve problems quickly, transfer best practices, develop professional skills, and recruit and retain talent (Wenger and Snyder, 2000).

2. Communities of Practice as communities of learners

A focus on the learning that can develop through participation in Communities of Practice is useful in order to understand the potential impact of Communities of Practice on individuals and groups.

Communities of Practice facilitate individual and organisational learning. For Wenger (1998), being alive as human beings means that we are constantly engaged in the pursuit of enterprises of all kinds, from ensuring our physical survival to seeking the loftiest pleasures:

As we define these enterprises and engage in their pursuit together, we interact with each other and with the world and we tune our relations with each other and with the world accordingly. In other words we learn. Over time, this collective learning results in practices that reflect both the pursuit of our enterprises and the attendant social relations. These practices are thus the property of a kind of community created over time by the sustained pursuit of shared enterprise. It makes sense, therefore, to call these kinds of communities Communities of Practice. (Wenger, 1998, p. 45)

In this way, Communities of Practice are an integral part of our daily lives and contradict the assumption that learning is an individual process, that it has a beginning and an end, that it is best separated from the rest of our activities, and that it is the result of teaching (Wenger, 1998, p. 3). Wenger sees learning as social participation and refers not just to engagements in localised activities with certain people, but to a more encompassing process of being active participants in the practices of social communities and constructing identities in relation to these communities (p. 4).

This definition of Communities of Practice as communities of learners is broad and can include families developing practices, routines, rituals and stories to establish a habitable way of life, workers organising their lives with their colleagues and customers to get their jobs done, students in schools and universities, and even recovering alcoholics who attend weekly meetings (Wenger, 1998, p. 6).

3. Virtual Communities of Practice

The concept of virtual Communities of Practice is useful in understanding how Communities of Practice can be developed and maintained using email and the Internet. In many cases a Community of Practice within an organisation uses email to connect its members. In this sense, virtual Communities of Practice exist as sub-sets of organisational Communities of Practice, the only difference being the method of connecting members. In addition, virtual Communities of Practice can develop away from any organisational setting, using the Internet as a means of linking people with common interests.

Kimble, Li and Barlow (2000) note that many commercial organisations now operate in a geographically and temporarily distributed environment. In order for such communities to function, they will have to operate (at least in part) in the virtual world:

Some aspects of a Community of Practice should translate from the co-located to the virtual world easily, for example finding a common purpose or at least a shared interest and if the members are doing similar jobs, then there will already be a shared domain language and knowledge. (p. 10)

In addition to virtual Communities of Practice in organisations, virtual communities also exist at a much broader level. For Wenger:

Across a worldwide web of computers, people congregate in virtual spaces and develop shared ways of pursuing their common interests. (2000, p. 6)

This can include people who connect through newsgroups, email, chat and websites devoted to topics of common interest.

References

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Communities of Practice

Benefits of Communities of Practice

Benefits of Communities of Practice are available for:

- individuals
- organisations (for practice and productivity).

The following tables summarise these benefits and underline the value of establishing and maintaining Communities of Practice.

Table 1: Benefits of Communities of Practice for individuals

Benefit	Description
Enable employees to manage change	<p>‘Communities frequently link people with a common interest who do not have regular day-to-day contact’ (McDermott, 2000, p. 3). They often form around technical disciplines and topics that draw people from many work teams.</p> <p>Wenger and Snyder (2000) argue that ‘when a company reorganises into a team-based structure, employees with functional expertise may create Communities of Practice as a way of maintaining connections with peers’. They believe that people may also form communities ‘in response to changes originating outside the organisation, such as the rise of e-commerce, or inside, such as new company strategies’ (p. 141).</p>
Provide access to new knowledge	<p>Stewart (1996) describes Communities of Practice as ‘groups that learn’ where members ‘collaborate directly, use one another as sounding boards, and teach each other’ (p. 2). This empowers individuals, opening up access to new knowledge and skills, and enables individuals to manage change and fulfil the requirements placed on them by society or by their employer.</p>

Table 1 continued

Benefit	Description
Foster trust and a sense of common purpose	According to McDermott (2000), frank and supportive discussions of real problems frequently build a greater sense of connection and trust between community members. 'As they share ideas and experiences, community members often develop a shared way of doing things, a set of common practices, and a greater sense of common purpose' (p. 4). In the course of helping each other, sharing ideas, and collectively solving problems, individuals 'often become a trusted group of peers' (p. 4).
Add value to professional lives	Communities of Practice frequently form around topics community members have invested many years in developing. McDermott (2000) maintains, however, that communities are not just focused on common interests, but on 'the practical aspects of a particular practice, everyday problems, new tools, developments in the field, and things that do and do not work' (pp. 2-3). In this way Communities of Practice add value to the professional lives of their members.

Table 2: Benefits of Communities of Practice for organisational practice

Benefit	Description
Encourage the sharing of ideas	Through participating in Communities of Practice, 'members develop the sense of trust and mutual obligation that is critical to encourage contribution and sharing of ideas and knowledge' (Lesser and Everest, 2001, p. 39).
Use knowledge management to drive strategy	According to Wenger and Snyder (2000), Communities of Practice are an important knowledge management strategy and as such can contribute to an organisation's strategic direction (p. 140).
Enable the transfer of expertise	Wenger and Snyder (2000) argue that Communities of Practice enable expertise to be transferred across organisations, encouraging the discussion of effective solutions to a range of problems.
Provide a spark for innovation	Communities of Practice 'provide an important spark for innovation' (Lesser and Everest, 2001, p. 39), through establishing a forum for individuals to share their knowledge and ideas.

Table 3: Benefits of Communities of Practice for organisational productivity

Benefit	Description
Facilitate rapid responses to customer problems	By developing knowledge of its members and their various strengths, Lesser and Everest (2001) believe that Communities of Practice enable organisations to quickly identify individuals with the subject-matter expertise necessary to provide the best answer to a client problem (p. 39).
Shorten the learning curve for new employees	Communities of Practice serve as a vehicle to develop mentoring relationships between junior employees and established practitioners. Lesser and Everest (2001) argue that this helps new employees to understand how their role fits into the wider organisational context and how their job impacts on other individuals and processes.

Table 3 continued

Benefit	Description
Identify talent in workgroups	According to Wenger and Snyder (2000), members of Communities of Practice have an understanding of the expertise within their community. Community members can identify opportunities that are tailor-made to the interests and expertise of their colleagues.

References

- Lesser, E., and Everest, K. (2001) 'Using Communities of Practice to Manage Intellectual Capital', *Ivey Business Journal*, March/April.
- McDermott, R. (2000) 'Knowing in Community: 10 Critical Success Factors in Building Communities of Practice' at <http://www.co-i-l.com/coil/knowledge-garden/cop/knowing.shtml>
- Stewart, T. (1996) 'The Invisible Key to Success', at http://home.att.net/~discon/KM/invisible_key.htm
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Communities of ▶ Practice

Annotations for VET Practitioners

The following annotations will assist practitioners participating in Reframing the Future projects to develop Communities of Practice across VET organisations, industries and State/Territory borders.

Categories

Three categories of Communities of Practice emerge from the literature and provide the sub-headings for the following lists of references:

1. Communities of Practice as collaborative groups within organisations
2. Communities of Practice as learning communities
3. Communities of Practice as virtual communities.

Rating system

We have developed a rating system, to guide you towards what we think are the best resources. The rating system is:

- **HIGH VALUE:** a resource that could be of immediate relevance to your Reframing the Future project
- **MEDIUM VALUE:** a resource that may be useful background information to your project
- **LOW VALUE:** a resource that may be useful for wider reading for your project.

The two best references

In the view of the authors, the two best references for gaining an immediate understanding of Communities of Practice are:

1. Wenger, E., and Snyder, W. (2000) 'Communities of Practice: The Organisational Frontier', *Harvard Business Review*, v. 78, no. 1, pp. 139–145; and

2. Wenger, E. (1998) *Communities of Practice: learning, meaning and identity*, Cambridge University Press, New York.

Annotations, by category

1. Communities of Practice as collaborative groups within organisations

In the following references, Communities of Practice are viewed as developments that occur inside organisations.

- 1.1 Allee, V. (2000) 'Knowledge Networks and Communities of Practice', *OD Practitioner*, v. 32, no. 4. Available at <http://www.odnetwork.org/odponline/vol32n4/knowledgenets.html> **(Medium Value)**
Examines the current imperative for organisations to invest in knowledge management, highlighting the value of Communities of Practice as knowledge resources. Also provides a useful outline of the role of Human Resource managers in the formation of Communities of Practice.
- 1.2 Amidon, D. (1997) 'Emerging Community of Knowledge Practice' *Knowledge Inc.*, v. 2, n. 3, March. Available at <http://www.entovation.com/info/cokp.htm> **(Low Value)**
Argues that knowledge is to be found in Communities of Practice and provides examples of the work done to develop the concept of these communities through the Institute for Research on Learning at Xerox Corporations' Palo Alto Research Centre (PARC).
- 1.3 <http://www.co-i-l.com/coil/knowledge-garden/cop> **(High Value)**
Identifies a number of the key issues for professionals interested in establishing or becoming involved in different kinds of Communities of Practice. For key definitions go to <http://www.co-i-l.com/coil/knowledge-garden/cop/definitions.shtml>
- 1.4 Dixon, N. (2000) *Common Knowledge – How companies thrive by sharing what they know*, Harvard Business School Press, Boston, Massachusetts. **(Low Value)**
Provides background reading for those interested in understanding concepts underpinning Knowledge Management. Discusses Communities of Practice in the context of knowledge as a group phenomenon.
- 1.5 Gourlay, S. (1999) 'Communities of Practice: A new concept for the millennium, or the rediscovery of the wheel', Kingston Business School, Kingston University. **(Low Value)**
Critiques the work of Wenger, Lave and Snyder and their various definitions and discussions of Communities of Practice and investigates varieties of Communities of Practice across different settings. Available in PDF format at <http://ktru-main.lanacs.ac.uk/pub/ol3.nsf/>
- 1.6 Hanley, S. (1999) 'Communities of Practice – A Culture Built on Sharing', *Information Week*, April 26, p. 16. **(Low Value)**
Discusses a number of knowledge management initiatives, including Communities of Practice, that have been adopted by an American company.
- 1.7 Lesser, E., and Everest, K. (2001) 'Using Communities of Practice to Manage Intellectual Capital' *Ivey Business Journal*, March/April, p. 37–41. **(High Value)**
Outlines the benefits of Communities of Practice and a number of areas for organisations to focus on, to enable these communities to better manage their

intellectual capital. Areas for attention include focusing resources on communities that have strategic implications for the organisation, providing the community with the time and space to interact, designating roles and responsibilities to support the community and marketing the community and its successful stories.

- 1.8 Lesser, E., and Prusak, L. (1999) 'Communities of Practice, Social Capital and Organisational Knowledge', *White Paper*, IBM Institute for Knowledge Management. **(Medium Value)**
- Discusses the links between Communities of Practice, social capital and knowledge management, exploring implications for managers involved in knowledge management and identifying methods for leveraging communities within their own organisation. Available at: <http://www.foundationknowledge.com/library/readings/IBM%20Whitepaper.htm>
- 1.9 Liebowitz, J. (ed.) (2000) *Knowledge Management Handbook*, CRC Press, New York **(Medium Value)**
- Identifies Communities of Practice in Chapter 8 as an alternative business framework that might be a powerful way to investigate, manage and guide the theory and practice of contemporary organisations.
- 1.10 McMaster, M. *Communities of Practice – An Introduction*, at <http://www.co-i-l.com/coil/knowledge-garden/cop/mmintro.shtml> **(Medium Value)**
- Outlines many of the drivers that lead to the formation of Communities of Practice.
- 1.11 McDermott, R. (2000) 'Knowing in Community: 10 Critical Success Factors in Building Communities of Practice' at <http://www.co-i-l.com/coil/knowledge-garden/cop/knowning.shtml> **(High Value)**
- A guide for professionals involved in knowledge management, as well as others simply interested in establishing Communities of Practice. It outlines ten important considerations and steps for establishing Communities of Practice, divided into the 'management challenge', the 'community challenge', the 'technical challenge' and the 'personal challenge'.
- 1.12 McDermott, R. (1999) 'Nurturing Three Dimensional Communities of Practice: How to get the most out of human networks', *Knowledge Management Review*, Fall edition. Available at <http://www.co-i-l.com/coil/knowledge-garden/cop/dimensional.shtml> **(High Value)**
- Outlines three criteria for establishing Communities of Practice: what kind of knowledge people need to share; how tightly bonded the community is; and how closely new knowledge needs to be linked with people's everyday work.
- 1.13 McDermott, R. (1999) 'Learning Across Teams: The role of Communities of Practice in Team Organisations', *Knowledge Management Review*, May/June. Available at <http://www.co-i-l.com/coil/knowledge-garden/cop/learning.shtml> **(Medium Value)**
- Critiques the limitations of cross-functional teams and suggests that these limitations are addressed by Communities of Practice that enable teams to systematically learn from each other.
- 1.14 Sharp, J. (1997) 'Communities of Practice: A review of the literature', at <http://www.tfriend.com/cop-lit.htm> **(Medium Value)**
- Provides references to a variety of sources, which are useful for developing a wider understanding of the issues involved in establishing and maintaining Communities of

Practice. Links to a range of other websites in providing a discussion of virtual Communities of Practice.

- 1.15 Sharp, J. (1997) 'Key Hypotheses in Supporting Communities of Practice' at <http://www.tfriend.com/hypothesis.html> **(High Value)**

Investigates how and why Communities of Practice develop, the impact that they can have and the means of ensuring success. The role of electronic communication is also discussed.

- 1.16 Snyder, W. (1997) 'Communities of Practice: Combining Organisational Learning and Strategy Insights to Create a Bridge to the 21st Century', *Academy of Management Conference* **(Medium Value)**

Proposes a Community of Practice approach to address a number of business challenges, including leveraging and stretching competence across functions within organisations and accelerating innovation.

- 1.17 Wenger, E. (1996) 'How to Optimise Organisational Learning', *Healthcare Forum Journal*, July/August, pp. 22–23. Available at <http://www.co-i-l.com/coil/knowledge-garden/cop/olearning.shtml> **(Medium Value)**

Outlines fourteen steps to assist individuals to work with rather than against the inner logic of organisational learning.

- 1.18 Wenger, E., and Snyder, W. (2000) 'Communities of Practice: The Organisational Frontier', *Harvard Business Review*, v. 78, no. 1, pp. 139-145. **(High Value)**

Provides a definition and various hallmarks of Communities of Practice and reasons why organisations should encourage their development. This article is a key starting point for reading about Communities of Practice and their possible effects on organisations.

- 1.19 <http://www.worldbank.org/knowledgebank/research.html> **(Low Value)**

Provides a real-life example of a group – the World Bank – encouraging the establishment of Communities of Practice through the design of a web portal for the private sector, international agencies, governments and non-government organisations. It is interesting to view as an example of the ways in which Communities of Practice are being developed and used.



26 **2. Communities of Practice as learning communities**

In the following references, Communities of Practice are defined as groups in which learning is encouraged and facilitated.

- 2.1 Barab, S., and Duffy, T. 'From Practice Fields to Communities of Practice', in Jonassen, D. D., & Land, S. M. (2000). (Eds.). *Theoretical Foundations of Learning Environments*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Mahwah, New Jersey. **(Low Value)**

Investigates theories of learning and cognition and relates them to Communities of Practice with references to much of the current literature. It aims to explore the characteristics of Communities of Practice, the advantages of learning from them and the approaches used by educators to develop them, particularly in schools. Available in PDF format at <http://inkido.indiana.edu/research/copfrt.html>

- 2.2 Fox, S. 'Foucault and the Actor Network Theory', The Management School, Lancaster University, UK. **(Low Value)**

Provides a highly academic critique of much of the well-known literature concerning Communities of Practice. Available in PDF format at <http://ktru-main.lancs.ac.uk/pub/ol3.nsf/> and by clicking on the link to The Management School.

- 2.3 Grisham, D., Bergeron, B., Brink, B., Farnam, N., Lenski, S., and Meyerson, M. (1999), 'Connecting Communities of Practice through Professional Development School Activities', *Journal of Teacher Education*, v. 50, no. 3, p. 180. **(Low Value)**

Describes the results of projects to develop collaborative arrangements between a number of schools and universities in the U.S.A to encourage innovation and to overcome challenges.

- 2.4 Lave, J., and Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge University Press, New York. **(Medium Value)**

This academic book is often referred to in the literature, as it brought to public attention the term Community of Practice. It focuses on a social theory of learning, and the authors define Communities of Practice in these terms, providing examples of several Communities of Practice as a means of explaining their arguments.

- 2.5 http://www.funderstanding.com/communities_of_practice.cfm **(Medium Value)**

A website dedicated to theories of learning, it contains a section on Communities of Practice which provides a succinct definition from a learning perspective.

- 2.6 http://home.att.net/~discon/KM/invisible_key.htm **(Low Value)**

Good background reading in order to further understand notions of learning through Communities of Practice. It maintains that Communities of Practice are among the most important structures of any organisation.

- 2.7 Wenger, E. (1998) 'Communities of Practice – Learning as a Social System', *Systems Thinker*, June. **(High Value)**

Provides an insight into Communities of Practice from both an organisational and learning perspective, arguing that a Community of Practice defines itself along three dimensions: what it is about; how it functions; what capability it has produced. Also found at <http://www.co-i-l.com/coil/knowledge-garden/cop/lss.shtml>

- 2.8 Wenger, E. (1998) *Communities of Practice: learning, meaning and identity*, Cambridge University Press, New York. **(High Value)**

Outlines the theoretical underpinnings of Communities of Practice and focuses on the social, cognitive and computational aspects of what it terms 'learning in doing'.

3. Virtual Communities of Practice

The following references refer to Communities of Practice that develop using the tools of email and the Internet.

- 3.1 Brown, J. S., and Duguid, P. (2000) *The Social Life of Information*, Harvard Business School Press, Boston. **(Low Value)**

Challenges predictions that Information Technology will lead to the demise of many organisations and forms of social interaction. It draws on experiences at Xerox PARC, and examples from IBM, Chiat/Day Advertising and California's Virtual University to show how Communities of Practice are making use of technology for knowledge development.

- 3.2 Kimble, C., Feng, L., and Barlow, A. (2000) 'Effective Virtual Teams through Communities of Practice', Strathclyde Business School, Research Paper no. 2000/9 **(High Value)**

Examines the nature of virtual teams and their place in the networked economy. It presents a framework for categorising virtual teams and argues that fundamental changes have taken place in the business environment which force people and organisations to operate in 'two spaces' simultaneously: the physical space and the electronic space. Available in PDF format at <http://www.mansci.strath.ac.uk/wp2000.html>

- 3.3 Newman, A., and Smith, M. (1999) 'How to create a virtual learning community', *Training and Development*, v. 53, no. 7, p. 44 **(Medium Value)**

Investigates how establishing virtual Communities of Practice using the latest technology will increase the opportunities of achieving real learning in organisations, which will result in improved job performance.

- 3.4 Rogers, J. (2000) 'Communities of Practice: A framework for fostering coherence in virtual learning communities', *Educational Technology and Society*, v. 3, n. 3. **(Medium Value)**

Presents a case study of an on-line workshop that was conducted via the worldwide web. It makes links between the original theories of Communities of Practice and Communities of Practice in a virtual setting and outlines some principles that educators can use to design more cohesive Communities of Practice. Available at http://ifets.ieee.org/periodical/vol_3_2000/e01.html

For more information, contact

Reframing the Future office
Regency Institute of TAFE
Elizabeth Campus
Woodford Road
Elizabeth SA 5112
Ph 08 8207 9655
Fax 08 8207 9708
framing.future@tafe.sa.edu.au
reframingthefuture.net

Communities of
▶ **Practice**